[Part III]

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Part II.

Part III

Years before, when Lucifer spent his first days in his cage, he discovered two things about Hell that he had not expected. (He hadn't expected to come to Hell at all, but his Father was not a merciful one, and he was not surprised that his fate was worse than death.)

The first thing about his cage that he discovers is that it is silent. He can speak, but he hears nothing. He attempts to draw noise, any noise from himself or the cage, and there would is none, and there was no fault in his form that prevented him from hearing.

It is only with the absence of noise that he discovers that he misses the constantly there quiet undercurrent of song that he has always heard in Heaven, that he has always identified as his brothers being present and alive and well. He aches with its loss, but can do nothing to break the silence.

The second thing about his cage that he discovers is that it is cold. It is a bone-deep cold that colors his breath and puts ice on his wings, which still ache from the initial descent into Hell, past the dark fires that color most of its landscape before the abrupt shift into the frigid winter that is the innermost circle of Hell.

The soot from the fires still stain his wings, but every time he removes the ice from his wings with touch and movement the ice falls away blackened and his wings are brighter for it.

He has to move, he finds, to prevent the cold from sinking into him too much and making it difficult for him to move. (He could, with effort, move again if he let it sink in, but he wants the movement, and he wants to remind himself that he is alive and has a purpose.)

For he has a purpose, he must have another purpose if he is to be left here, alive and still able to think and touch and feel.

The trouble is, he doesn't know when that purpose will be revealed, if it ever is, and all he can look forward to in the near future is this silent captivity and constant cold.

He defines the edges of his cage in hand-widths, and he finds all four corners of it, and he curls up at one corner of it after hours of moving and closes his eyes, retreating to rest.

He lets the cold sink in, and he lets the ice grow, and he tries not to think for a long time. It helps keep the memories, which are still fresh and painful to think of, at bay.

For a time.

Eternity is his cage. Eternity is silence, and cold, and unchanging walls that are always a pale grey blue, and it is memories.

Memories that haunt Lucifer, and when he sits for eons in a corner, letting the cold sink in he sees ghosts of Michael, of Gabriel, of Raphael and of so many other angels that he has a crowd before him, taking turns in coming up to him and yelling or asking for more touches or to stand before him, bristling with mute anger.

They all fade the moment he reacts and blinks away ice and struggles to his feet, and the moment he is standing again they are completely gone and he is once again alone in the cage.

He draws on the walls of his cage with his fingers, but the drawings don't stay for long before more ice cleans the walls and lays it blank once again. He has tried to see where the ice goes, when it cracks and falls to the floor when he moves, but he blinks away ice crystals from his eyes and the ice is gone when he looks again.

There is an endless fire in him, and his Grace, his essence burns and makes him feel the cold intently, but he knows that it will lose its warm eventually without access to Heaven and God.

Each time he moves, each time he exhales and every single time he blinks a fraction of his heat escapes, and he knows that if he spends long enough in here that he will lose it all, and that is when he will match his cage entirely. He wonders if he will be able to sit in a corner and be unable to get up again if he has no heat.

He wonders if he would let himself sit like that, if he would let himself become immobile, but when he sits for long enough and remains cold for long enough he sees his memories and hears them and he can feel the touch of skin and Grace to his hands if he lets the chill sink in.

If he closes his eyes for long enough, he can pretend that he is in Heaven, that the cold is actually warmth, and that he isn't alone.

For after eternity in the cage, he has decided that the worst thing about it is that

he is alone. He has no one to hold on to, no one to reach out to, and no one to touch and worst of all, no one to *talk* to.

God, he thinks with a shiver, he would tear off a wing if it meant that he could talk to someone.

Another eternity later he watches the last of his heat go as he exhales, and he runs a hand through the heated air, and he draws back with a sharp hiss. It *hurt*, the heat, and his hand stings as if it were burned.

Abruptly he sees Uriel before him with his twin blades of fire, and Gabriel and Michael and Raphael with their swords of fire, and he thinks of how many of his kin wield the element, and he flinches back from the image before him.

He doesn't need to be seated and holding still to hear and feel and see his memories. They are the only things he can hear, these days, and he wouldn't mind hearing them but for the frequency with which he hears Michael condemning his actions in his strong, clear voice.

Sometimes he paces and flies up the walls and down again as fast as he can, all to escape the hatred in Michael's voice that he hears following him.

Sometimes he slams his fist into his legs hard enough to make them hurt and burn and he doesn't want to think of how effective that is at driving his memories away. He hasn't been forced to use that technique yet, but he is afraid for the day when he will.

(Sometimes he hears Gabriel's shamed moans from their first time over Michael's anger and he curls into as tight a ball as he can and digs his fingers into his arms and it *doesn't make it stop*.)

(He has discovered that he cannot cry in his cage, not with the cold destroying tears before he can shed them, but sometimes he still tries out of grief, out of anger and a mad urge to feel something other than the cold and the confines of his cage.)

He stumbles back into the wall, and slides down it until he is sitting again, and he wonders if he'll be able to get up now. He knows now that he won't be able to let himself stay seated, not with memories following him, and sometimes he needs to run, to try to fight uselessly at his confines.

He looks at his hands, and he sees how grey and blue they are, and he wonders at how his face looks. He wonders at how his wings look now, and he wonders at what Gabriel would think if he saw him now.

He doesn't need to wonder at Michael's reaction, for he has heard his hatred too many times by far.

As nothing happens beyond his memories changing their focus once again (he now hears Michael's desperate grief and denial at Lucifer's betrayal, and he now hears Gabriel's pleading tones, and he hears and he sees and he doesn't want to) he spends a long time thinking about humanity and how strange it is that God wants his angels to bow to them.

He spends time contemplating their form, their short life-spans, and he wonders at ways to improve them, or simply to reduce them to everything he hates about them.

He has time, he redesigns humanity to the sound of swords clashing and he has time to break them all down into useless, pathetic creatures.

When he decides to stop working on the designs and plans, he discovers that has forgotten to name these new creatures who are certainly not humans, not anymore.

He thinks for a long time, and when he whispers the name he cannot hear it, as the only sounds allowed to him are from his memories. The ice catches and freezes the word in the air, however, and he knows with a cold certainty that he will not forget this idea.

"Demons." (The name has no special meaning, not to him, not yet. It is simply a term for an idea.)

If Lucifer could have heard his voice, could have heard himself at all, he would have been surprised at the new sound his voice is, one that is cold and calm and brittle. (With use he could hone his voice into a new sharpness, a new strength that would restore some of its former glory.

But it is now the voice of a corrupter and poisonous tempter, even if he could attempt to strengthen it. It is one of the many ways that he has been marked by his cage.)

It first enters his awareness through a quiet scraping noise, one that he barely notices over his memories (which are following Raphael, have been following Raphael for hours and hours now) and it's only when the scraping interrupts the sounds his memories has that he notices that it exists at all.

Lucifer stops in his pacing, and looks around his cage, eyes sharp and able to find anything different about his cage with ease. But there is no visible difference, nothing beyond the patterns in the ice on the walls and floor, and that changes often enough. No, the only thing different about the cage now is the sound.

It hasn't stopped, and it seems to be getting louder, more insistent, and Lucifer has to cover his ears at it, as Raphael won't stop repeating the same sentence

and it is simply overwhelming.

"Why did you lie to Michael?" Raphael asks again, and Lucifer wants to shout at him to *stop asking that, stop I have no answer, not anymore, not now* but he says nothing for why should he speak if he has no one (*so alone*) to talk to?

Instead he lashes out at the image of Raphael, for futile action is all he has left to himself in the cage, and Raphael's image just shivers in the air and flickers as it repeats itself.

But this time Lucifer isn't listening to it, isn't paying attention for it, as when he moved he *heard* the ice cracking as it fell from his wings and he *heard* the sound of his feet tearing free from the floor as he moved and he *heard* when his world has been silence but for cruel, painful memories.

It only takes a moment for him to spread his wings entirely, to savor the sound of ice that had been forming on them for centuries breaking off as he stretches a part of himself that he hasn't moved for the longest time.

He closes his eyes and flaps them, savoring the sound of ice shattering as it hits the ground, and he savors even the new scraping sound that heralded the return of his ability to hear.

And in savoring it, he attempts to locate its source, if it has one, and after some more movement and even a short jump that has him hovering by the ceiling he is able to pick the wall where the sound is coming from.

He lands next to the wall, stops to savor the sound his impact makes, quiet as it is, and doesn't notice when his memory-Raphael vanishes behind him. He rests a hand on the wall, smiling at the scraping sound, and for the first time since his initial arrival in the cage he draws up his power and draws the ice in the cage away from his body and wings and the walls and he forms it into a large pole. He holds it, weighing it in his hands, and strengthens it so that it will not break until he is done with it.

He steps back from the wall and the movement is as familiar as if he had done it yesterday as he drives the pole forward in a long thrusting movement.

It strikes the center of the wall, and he feels the shock of the blow reverberate down into his arms and with effort he doesn't let himself be pushed back or feel the pain of it.

For a long moment there is utter silence again as the scraping halts and no ice falls. Then Lucifer draws back the pole and stops.

There is a crack in the cage. There is a small crack, a hair-line fracture, a single point of weakness.

He hears Michael whisper to him that 'this is wrong, this is wrong' but that is about a different subject and that was so very long ago. This crack may be

wrong, his cage may have been built to last, but here is a flaw, and he will do anything - *anything* - to exploit it.

So he strikes it again, and again, and when the force of his blows overwhelms the pole (even if he has strengthened it) and it crumbles he lets it go and hurls his fists at it, and he restores his hands even as he wounds them.

At length he stops, stops to see if he's made any progress at all, and it his relief he can see that the crack has widened, that while the width is small, it is something new and it is something hopeful.

(He cannot help but think of how cruel his Father is, and he cannot help but think that it would be appropriate for this to be a sham, to be a sham hope, but he has to discard that. *Has* to pretend that this isn't a sham and he has to believe in this small hope.)

Lucifer knows that on the other side of his cage is Hell, but all he can do is think of his comrades in battle, and of how they were also condemned to Hell, and that means that he would have someone - anyone - to talk to if he freed himself.

He brings up his Grace again, and he looks at the boundaries of his cage with new eyes, attempting to get a look at the wards and bindings that have held him for so long.

He reads the sigils, the ones that are visible to his eyes, and he sees where the crack has broken the line of one formerly-perfect sigil. It's not enough to free him entirely, not without widening and other sigils being marred, but it's somewhere to start.

Then there is the sound of scraping once again, and Lucifer cannot help but try to find its origin once again. He starts by listening to his crack and then above it and he cannot help but let out a broken laugh (that he *hears*) when he realizes that it is coming from the crack, and it isn't a random noise.

It's someone, something, anything deliberately trying to get inside his cage.

His first instinct is to flee, to dart to the other side of the cage, and once he realizes that he is already retreating he twists the skin of his left arm to cause a pain that clears his mind. It's the instinct of a caged beast, to want to stay in the cage that is familiar and safe.

It's not what Lucifer wants.

He obeys his second instinct, which is to move closer to the crack (which is about his eye-level in height) and examine it. It's thin, deep down, far back. It's thin enough that he can send a lance of power through to it and break that surface, and he has his first small glimpse of outside.

The scraping stops. There's a sound that he cannot identify, and then there is an eye peering through the crack, and Lucifer knows who is attempting to free him:

Merihim, one of the Thrones who followed him for hatred of humanity, and for the chance to utterly destroy Raphael. (Lucifer never understood this inborn hatred Merihim held for his brother, but he hadn't wasted the chance for an ally.)

"Greetings, Lord," Merihim says, and Lucifer rests a hand on the ice to prevent himself from falling back. He is already committing the timbre of Merihim's voice to memory, and he is already willing to hear more.

"Merihim," Lucifer says, and he slips to the side to keep Merihim from seeing the surprise in his eyes. For his voice has changed with the disuse, and it is as unfamiliar to him as the appearance of warmth in Merihim's skin is. He closes his eyes for a brief moment and steadies himself enough to return to the glimpse of Hell. "How have you created this breach?"

"I slew the guards with Belial's help, Lord. We have freed ourselves and others, and Hell is ours."

Hell is ours. Lucifer muffles the surprise but he lets Merihim see the pride - even if Hell is so much worse than Heaven, it belongs to them. The Fallen will defend it from Heaven, he is sure.

"Not all wish to see you freed," Merihim tells him, quietly, and Lucifer nods.

"I understand. I expected this, you know, so don't do anything about them on my behalf." Lucifer had expected it, from the moment he had lost. Those who had followed him had been depending on his success, expecting it. He had failed them, after all, and anger was only natural.

"If they attempt to prevent this work, we will defend ourselves," Merihim answered, and he left the flaw in the cage and returned to work on it, and Lucifer heard the scraping sound once more.

He retreated from the opening, and sat in a far corner, letting the ice begin to accumulate on him once again as he thought over the situation.

Once he was freed, he would need to find those who held anger regarding him. He would need to offer some form of penance, or he would have to force them back under his control. For he already knew, even as he realized it as a conscious thought, that he would return to Heaven one day.

Lucifer closed his eyes as he realized what that meant, and he thought again of Michael, his brother who he would need to destroy if he intended to remain in Heaven.

The crack in the cage widened, and he suddenly wished for it to be sealed over, for with the possibility of escape came the inevitable knowledge that he would be required to fight Michael once again, and he would be required to drive his sword through Michael's chest and destroy him utterly, for there was no possible way for them to coexist peacefully.

Not anymore.

Merihim dragged his claws through the ice, hissing once again at the noise and the chill, and once again he pushed Grace through his blows, forcing the cut of his claws to land much deeper than they did physically, as the true bindings on the cage was not the ice, but the sigils etched deep within.

His hands were numb with cold and he had to stop often to let them warm, and he thought of Lucifer, and how cold it must be within his confines. This led him once more to end his break early and return to his work.

Belial was coming, he knew, as she had left to retrieve several Fallen who had not wanted to fight the guards but who would be able to help with the wards.

For even as Merihim made progress there was still so many large and complex wards etched in the ice and in the air and he could not break them all with merely his claws or his power.

He was able to communicate with Lucifer, however, and he had broken one of the wards that he was sure had been harming his Lord: a ward of silence, one that enforced the absence of sound in the cage. He had read those sigils and when he had heard Lucifer's voice he had understood why such a cruel creation had been used.

"You will be freed, Lord," Merihim murmured as he worked, for he had forgiven Lucifer for failing. He understood it, for he too had faltered on the battlefield. Verchiel still lived, after all, and Merihim had once dug his claws into his neck, and if not for his own hesitation, Verchiel would not have survived the battle.

(But how could he slay his brother in arms, the one who had shared his duties, the one who he had practiced the use of sigil-magic with? How could he behead him while looking in his eyes?)

Merihim understood, and so he committed his claws and hands to cold and tore at the sigils he could reach and rend.

Belial of black wings and red hair and uncertain gender, one who was never taught of the pleasure of flesh by Lucifer's hands, one who knew that she would follow Lucifer from the moment he declined to answer her kiss, ("Why should I teach you, Belial? You and I are not meant for each other", such a beautifully painful refusal) she is so painfully devoted to Lucifer that it pains the other angels in turn to see her eyes when she speaks of him.

She is bound in chains of black metal that when moved rumble with power that stinks of binding and weakness, and so she doesn't move them often. Belial instead studies her guard, and for a time she doesn't struggle to free herself or

speak to him. She watches him stand like a statue, silently watching over the long plains that are this level of Hell. He can see many chained Fallen from his position, and it is only luck that Belial is close enough to truly study him, and perhaps draw his attentions.

She doesn't know his name, but she knows what he is, and she knows what he has never experienced. That is more than enough for her, especially after she has managed to catch his eyes and stare at him for long periods of time.

Belial can break this statue, she can destroy this guard. She's sure of it.

She endures the weight and the pain and the weakness to pull aside her clothes, to shred them into revealing tatters, and if her flesh stings and burns where it touches the chains? She can endure it, has endured so much already. This is for her Lord, her beloved Lucifer and she will do anything, endure anything for him.

Belial licks her lips and catches the eye of her guardian angel once more, mouth curling into a lascivious smirk. She doesn't need to speak, not when she can show him everything he's never wanted before with her eyes and her mouth. She bares her heart to him, shows him her ferocious love in it, nevermind that her love isn't for him, and she parts her lips. In-between the minutes she reads his confusion, his suspicion and his curiosity.

It is an easy, slow movement that draws his attention: her hand sliding down her thigh, slowly. Her fingers loose and relaxed against her skin, and when she draws her hand back up her thigh, dips her fingers under the shredded cloth, spreads her legs ever so slightly, his gaze is trapped, riveted, and she knows that she has him.

Angels are repressed, horribly bound creatures, she thinks, and she slips fingers inside her thighs, doesn't show him a thing beyond her gentle trembling as she fingers herself. It's a hint of weakness, of a passive creature that would never do such things. Such a creature would never reach out to the angel and crook her fingers, with an open invitation for more, and such a creature would never draw him closer with half-closed eyes and the shivers of pleasure.

Such a naive creature would never kiss an angel, would never run teasing fingers across his flesh, and such a naive, innocent creature would surely never drive fingers into an angel's eyes and break his neck with a blow.

Belial smiles down at her victim, at his sword lying discarded next to him, and she laughs as she is able to pick up the sword despite the weight of her chains, and she breaks the chains with strength channeled through the sword.

Her wings burst into existence with the weight of the chains gone, and she is rising up, away from her captivity when she turns to her neighboring prisoners and dives down towards one she recognizes and knows.

"Merihim," Belial smirks at him, flesh still hanging from her hands as she's swinging her stolen sword from her fingers. "Would you care to make a deal?"

Merihim is such a pure, strong angel. She has never understood his distaste for the pleasures of the flesh, but then again he has features in his form that are too...primal for her tastes. His hands are almost paws, with claws that are unable to retract, and there is a distinct set to his face that reminds her greatly of the felines upon earth. He is shaped like a human as she is, but his features are enough to prevent a mistaken identity.

"Belial," Merihim answers, and she can see how the chain weakens him, makes him weary. He raises his arms, holds them out. He's expecting her to free him.

"Put them down, Merihim, I'm not cutting them yet." Belial's not seducing, not innocent anymore. She has no need to be. Merihim knows who and what she is.

He lowers his arms, frowning as if to say 'go on, tell me why I'm not free now.'

"I need your help," Belial says, each word carefully enunciated. "To free our Lord." She's expecting a protest, some resistance to the idea, as she heard the anger towards Lucifer as she was bound in Hell.

Merihim gives her a long look. "I will help, Belial. He is not one who should be bound."

Belial looks back, and she's smiling when she raises her sword. Merihim is one who understands, she thinks, even if he follows her lord for all of the wrong reasons. He's one of those angels who followed Lucifer for his reasons, and not for the freedom to do as he wished.

Merihim raises his hands again, and she severs the chain with single slice. Belial doesn't help him remove the rest of them, and he throws them off with his own power.

"This way," Belial says, watching as his golden wings burst from his back and into existence as the chain lands in a pool at his feet. She spreads her own wings and rises into the air, sword at the ready.

The air grows colder, there is a white dust beginning to coat the ground, and Belial still continues her descent into Hell with Merihim at her side. There are great walls that resemble the sides of caves, coated with ice that narrow as they descend into the pit that is the lowest circle of Hell, and the chill worsens as they descend. Yet even as it narrows it is still a vast, vast pit that would require some time to cross.

It feels like they could fly forever and never leave this terrible chill behind. There has never been such a cold in Heaven, and Belial has never heard of such a chill existing on Earth. She grips her stolen sword tighter, glad for its presence, and to her great relief she sees something below them in the distance.

It doesn't take long before she can pick out four bright points of light, and it doesn't take much thought to realize that they are angels, guards from Heaven.

"I want that one," Belial gestures to Merihim, waits for his acknowledgement and then she folds her wings and drops into a hard dive, sword held out before her, and moments later she has impaled her target and driven him down and the flare of his death nearly blinds her as she drags her sword out, grabs his sword and races to climb up again.

As she flies up she is nearly blinded once again Merihim rips his claws through another guard, but she can see him steal the sword from his victim and use it to defend himself as the other guards reach him.

There is something to be said for staying out of battles, and avoiding them altogether, but Belial can see how Merihim won't win this fight without her help, and she needs his help later. So she raises her sword once again and drives it through the back of one of Merihim's attackers, one who hadn't realized that she had flown as swiftly as she had. He dies with a bright flare, but she is the only one to see it.

The final guard is trading sword blows with Merihim, but Belial has no need to interfere, not when Merihim is stronger and has forced his enemy's blade aside and has driven his sword forward, causing one more bright flare.

They retrieve the swords from the two angels and fly up once again to hover in the air next to each other. Merihim holds two of the swords and Belial holds three, and now if they free more Fallen they have weapons for them, for not all angels have claws like Merihim does. With luck they will find the weapons that belonged to them from before the Fall, but Belial's not holding out for such a find.

She watches the bodies of the slain fall deeper, further into Hell, and she wonders at how deep Hell truly is. As they fall the darkness deepens and she cannot see them without following, and she has no desire to follow them deeper.

Not when there is Lucifer's cage, gleaming faintly in the center of this level of the pit, wrapped in chains and ice. It is anchored to the walls with four chains that dwarf Belial in size. There is no possible way to determine how big the cage itself is through the great layers of ice and chain, but the structure easily dwarfs them as they fly to hover above it.

The only colors that Belial could use to describe it are a pale blue, greys and touches of white. The cage itself does not glow, but the countless sigils she can see within it all gleam with a pale blue light that shows how strong the bindings on Lucifer are. The chains aren't marked with sigils, but they are strong, stronger than the chains that they were bound with.

Belial looks at this great cage and struggles to hold off despair. Destroying such a thing will take time, a great deal of effort and if possible an angel with the knowledge required to remove the sigils without the danger of breaking them outright. She will see it destroyed, yes, but it won't be an easy task, not without

more help.

Merihim looks at her, then drives his two blades forward into the ice, breaking off some of it free, and he secures his footing by standing against his swords. Once steady, he rears back and stabs his claws deep into the ice, deep into the cage.

"You can't attack it at random, Merihim!" Belial reaches to stop him, afraid that there will be a backlash of a reaction, some terrible new problem because of this.

He pauses in his motions and she freezes, hand out-stretched.

"Look, there, at the faint sigil behind the wards for physical strength. It's a plain warding to alert the guards if any of the other sigils are tampered with. As we've just slain them, destroying it won't bring us any harm, even if it goes off." He shows her his claws, with their own etchings of sigils drawn on them. "It's a sigil I use in combat often, to penetrate behind armor. My claws will ignore what I don't want them to touch, and I may destroy what is behind the larger wards."

Belial draws her hand back and nods, mute with annoyance and pride. She had chosen the correct angel, that much was certain, but she would have appreciated knowing about his claws before he had acted.

"The guards weren't too strong, were they?" Merihim asks as he claws through the ward. "Nor our chains too strong. You don't supposed that we were supposed to be freed, do you?"

"It makes no difference if we were, provided that we stay free." Belial creates her own hold on the ice with two of her blades and stands on them, once more swinging her original blade between her hands.

"It makes me wonder, that's all."

Belial hms, understanding what he means, and sets to studying the sigils again. Perhaps there is one near the surface of the ice that she can reach and destroy without trouble.

Perhaps, she thinks with dark humor, perhaps there would also be a convenient seal to destroy that would release all of the wards at once. It would be nice, wouldn't it?

Belial shakes her head at herself, smiling, and gets back to her work.

The moment the wards preventing him from reaching out with his senses to see beyond the ice fall, even with his eyes closed and his focus inward
Lucifer *knows* that he can see, now.

There is the sound of ice breaking as he opens his eyes and studies the walls of his prison, and there is the now-everpresent scraping sound of Merihim working

to destroy his cage.

It takes a moment to find the old twist of power that lets him see, and then he sees beyond the ice, and he can study the wards on his cage, and he can see Merihim, and if he looks up he can see the endless walls of the lowest circle of Hell.

He refuses to look down, not yet, not until he's prepared for the sight.

Lucifer stands, and he will never tire of the cracking sounds ice makes when he moves, as he will never forget the eternity of silence and loneliness. He crosses to the hole in his cage and he draws Merihim's attention with the sharp *crack* of a sigil breaking. (Now that he can see them all, he can spot the weak links in the wards, and he can use the hole to reach out with Grace to destroy them.)

"Lord?" Merihim asks, and Lucifer can see him fully now. "Did you destroy that?"

"No one else is here - who else could have destroyed it? You've done me a great favor, Merihim. I can now see beyond the walls and read the sigils that are yet unbroken."

Lucifer watches as Merihim's body loses a tenseness, and and he smiles to see Merihim lower his hands.

"That is most pleasing to hear...I confess that I am not entirely confident in my skills at identifying the more complex sigils, and I was taking some risks in breaking some of the ones I did."

Lucifer laughs as he hears this, and he rests a hand on the wall, amused.

"You've done well, very well." Lucifer drags his hand down the frozen surface and pauses. "You may rest. I doubt you are well-adjusted to the cold."

Merihim bows his head. "Thank you, my lord," He says before flying back to one of the great chains and sitting on one giant link. Lucifer watches him go, studies the chains that still wrap around his cage and anchor it, and sits to close his eyes again.

It is a small delay, but it will suffice for now to keep him inside his cage. He cannot welcome the weakness, but a small indulgence lets him rest easy, knowing that he will not face the larger realities of his situation quite yet.

Belial breaks Asmodeus' chains without much more than a simple greeting, and the moment he is freed she holds out a sword. He is a Fallen angel that she understands, has understood even before she truly understood the depths of her love for Lucifer.

Asmodeus would not harm her, would not turn on her without a strong reason to,

and Belial knows that he lacks one.

"You want something from me, don't you?" He asks once he has shaken off his chains, and he cannot help a slow grin. "Help in freeing Lucifer, perhaps?"

"The wards on his prison are complex and intricate things, Asmodeus." Belial turns away, more than ready to return. "You are well versed in such things."

"And if I decline to help, Belial?" Asmodeus chuckles to himself. "Don't answer that. You know I'm no fool."

Belial gives Asmodeus a look and shakes her head. "This way." She rises into the air and goes, and doesn't look as he manifests his wings, and she doesn't look to see if he's following.

There's no reason to, after all, as Asmodeus is practical and understands all too well that Lucifer is the only one who could keep them alive if Heaven attacked once again. He follows.

It doesn't take long for Lucifer to realize that he cannot banish his memories and their hallucinations for long. As Merihim rests at a distance, Gabriel is the one to appear before him, and Gabriel is the one to reach out to him and say 'please touch me.'

Lucifer catches himself reaching back before he pulls his hand back, curls back into himself. He misses Gabriel, he craves the brightness that Gabriel had. Lucifer remembers how Gabriel defended him, how Gabriel ached to see his family fight, and he remembers most of all how Gabriel tasted.

It doesn't take long before his own words echo in the room, reminding him that he had once threatened Gabriel and known that he could have slain him, *would* have slain him.

It doesn't take long after that before Lucifer bolts up and focuses on reading the sigils, focuses on finding the right one to break.

The last sigil falls, the chains break and the ice falls into the dark as Lucifer waits for the walls of his cage to break.

They never do. The walls remain strong, immovable even with no chains to hold them up or bear them down, and he cannot pass through them. He sends his angels away, and they fly up and out of the cold, back to the largest portions of Hell that he has bade them to rule over.

The only angel defying his order is Merihim.

Merihim refuses to ascend out of the cold, and he refuses to leave Lucifer alone in the dark, regardless of Lucifer's orders. He perches on the remains of the great chains where they are connected to the walls and he stands vigil over the cage.

Lucifer curses him for hours before lapsing into silence, and Merihim hears nothing from Lucifer or the cage for days after that. He doesn't leave his vigil, and he discovers that the cold makes his body ache in ways that he has never felt before.

It has been nearly a week since the breaking of the sigils when Merihim hears his name being called.

Lucifer wishes to speak with him. Merihim promptly spreads his wings and bears the pain of moving his body through cold and approaches the cage, hovering near it.

"Lord?" He asks.

"Merihim," Lucifer says, and Merihim has to strain his ears to hear it, and he flies closer, cautious. "Merihim, I have orders for you."

"I am listening, Lord," Merihim answers.

"Go below," Lucifer says, and his voice is louder now. "Go as far below as you can and discover what is down there. Something lies below Hell, and I want it. Go down there and bring back answers. Bring back something I can use."

Merihim closes his eyes, shivering involuntarily. It's less about the cold he feels and more about the fear he feels. For below Hell it will be colder, it will be emptier, and he...he has no choice.

"Yes, Lucifer," He says quietly, audibly. He must obey. "I will return with something."

"Merihim, go." Lucifer says. Merihim doesn't listen to the 'goodbye' that Lucifer says after that.

Instead he folds his wings and drops down in a dive, pulling his hands close and bearing the cold as best he can, as diving down...

It doesn't take long before it feels like he is diving headfirst into the side of Lucifer's cage. It hurts, there's an almost physical resistance, and he is so, so cold. Merihim doesn't turn to look up, however, and he doesn't close his eyes and he doesn't slow his descent.

Instead he notes how the walls are narrowing, and he notes how the cold seems to make the darkness sharper, how it improves how far into the dark he can see.

He continues his drop and abruptly the walls stop, and he *knows* that he is no longer in Hell, but instead below it. (Merihim would never have suspected that

there was anything below Hell. He was waiting for the walls to go closely enough together that he wouldn't have been able to continue.)

He flares his wings, stopping his descent and looks up, and there is the hole he came from, with a distant light above. He flies to the side of the hole, and he has to stop. Above him, in the endless dark, is the shape of Hell, the shape of the walls widening and Merihim knows that he could fly up there, find the bottom of the plains of fire, follow the shape of Hell up and up and up.

He knows that flying that distance would take him until the end of time, and longer. He shivers again at the thought of endlessly following the outside of the walls, endlessly alone and in the dark and cold.

Merihim turns away from that, and looks below, beyond Hell.

There is the endless dark, but with the cold sharpening his senses and clarifying the sight of the dark he can see: there is something. Something vast, something moving, something that he knows is *old*.

It is only Lucifer's order and Merihim's loyalty that prevents him from immediately turning and returning to Hell. He wants to, he knows. He wants to flee and hide and he wants to do anything but descend further and discover what the *something* below him is.

Most of all he is afraid that whatever it is, that it will notice him.

Merihim is afraid, and so he descends down, down into the dark beyond the bounds of creation.

Lucifer spends his days pacing his cage, attacking the walls until he is sore, tired and so full of pain that he can only lie in a heap on the floor and let his memories run free. It has been so long, and he is in so much pain that he barely notices when they run together and make so little sense that Raphael could be Gabriel, that Barbelo could be the oldest of his brothers, that he could have killed Michael before fighting Uriel and being cast out of Heaven by a human.

It has been so, so long, and he is so, so tired.

Angels don't sleep, and they rest only when wounded, but Lucifer thinks that this state of exhaustion combined with his memories gone wrong could be called sleep.

It is far too close to the idea of humanity for him to enjoy it. He would shake it off, and move and rest properly if he could, but he is tired, and cold, and he cannot bring himself to move.

He lies like that forever, staring blindly at the walls, and so more eons pass before anything changes for him.

The memory of an idea comes to him, attacks him one moment, and Lucifer tears himself free from where he has frozen to the floor as he stands.

He raises his head and looks up, looks outward, and he spreads his Grace out as he forces one of his Fallen to action in his stead.

It isn't long before a dead human soul is caught and returned to Hell, and it isn't long before all the angels in Hell know what to do in regards to it. It isn't long after that before Hell has begun to collect the souls of dead humans that Heaven denies Paradise to, and it isn't long after that before the first demons are formed.

Lucifer throws his attention into watching over this, into forgetting about memories and sleep and the walls of his cage. It even works, sometimes.

Hundreds of years pass on Earth, and in Scotland a tailor makes a deal and dies ten years later.

A young (for demons can be young, or recently created) demon named Crowley suffers terribly at the hands of one of Hell's most accomplished demons: Alastair. Alastair, who has become a fixture in Hell, who is the best torturer Hell has, who can make any human scream and ask for more.

All he requires is time and a blade, and even the Fallen angels are certain that they could not withstand his work. Not that they admit it.

Crowley is not one of the Fallen, but only a recently deceased man, and so he breaks easily, gives up on resisting the pain, gives up on refusing to inflict it upon others.

The first human soul he slices into is a young man, fresh into adulthood, and Crowley tears into him with relish, giving vent to a long held anger, and Alastair watches him work for several days before stopping Crowley on the fourth day.

"You're not one of mine," He says with his strange drawl, eyes glinting in the red light. "You're far better with words than I, Crowley, and so terrible with a blade. You're perfect for someone else, you know." Alastair takes the razor from Crowley's hands, cuts the throat of the young man so he can't interrupt them with screaming. "We're going on a *field trip*, Crowley."

Alastair has more than two legs sometimes, and sometimes he has a more than human shape. This is one of those days where he has vestigial wings and knives

in his fingers and unimpeded speech. (Crowley hasn't yet begun to lose the memory of his original shape, and so appears as himself, even down to the well-tailored suit.)

This is also one of his rare days when he is traveling beyond his domain, and minor demons dart out of his way as they travel down the tunnels, down to a portion of Hell that Alastair's been dealing with for centuries.

"I never trade with the same one more than once," He comments to Crowley. "But we have a cosy bargain, and they've got a new one who I would love to examine." (A twinge of pain lances through Crowley's arms at the tone. He knows what that means.)

Crowley's not stupid enough to ask, not when Alastair's not inviting questions. Instead he pays attention to what turns they take in the tunnels, to how the landscape warps around them and then at last to the ornate door they are walking through.

It doesn't take him long to realize that this isn't Alastair's domain at all: the floors are stone, the lighting is a harsh white instead of that sickly sweet red, and most of all Crowley can't hear screams or the sound of flesh or any of the background noise he has learned over his stay in Hell so far.

Instead it's silent, and he can hear the click of Alastair's talons on the floor before he stops before an ornate desk. Crowley stops a second later and examines the demon behind the desk, slightly startled to see how *human* the demon looks. All Crowley can think of is negotiating the cost of shipping and supplies with a representative of the VOC in one of his worse off ventures into expanding his business.

He had failed, then, he thinks. The desk smells strongly of burning trees and then Alastair is speaking, and Crowley drags himself free from memories.

"...send over that fresh face, and you can have this one. Fair's fair, and we both know that he's set to strong arm more deals into action than sweet talk them, yes?"

The demon behind the desk gives Crowley an inquisitive look, and leans back in his chair. "One test, Alastair. We can't accept him without a test."

"That wasn't the agreement."

"The contract says that we're allowed to check for quality goods, Alastair," the demon says, raising a hand, a long piece of paper appearing in his hand. "Care to read it over?"

All Crowley can think of is how annoying those contracts were, and how many open loopholes he could find in them, but couldn't use, not to his benefit.

"Test away, then. Test away." Alastair looks at Crowley, and Crowley would like

nothing better than to avoid returning to the fleshpit that is Alastair's hell. So when the other demon puts the paper on his end of the desk and says 'find a loophole in this for me,' Crowley ignores how Alastair's lips curl and reads it.

(Oh, he knows that the demon doesn't want him, doesn't want to make this trade. There shouldn't be a loophole in this contract, he knows. It's a rigged test, and isn't that just typical.)

He finds and reads the part about checking for quality goods, and it just isn't right how his respect for this demon plummets. This was supposed to be rigged, he thinks.

"There's one here, as I'm sure you've noticed. This ability of yours to check for quality goods specifies quality goods as 'humanoid, able to speak understandably and with a clear mind that shows proficiency with the business of deal-making', and I can tell you now that being able to read and follow this contract qualifies me." He smiles at the other demon. "I suggest you give Alastair his end of the bargain, or I'll find a good reason for you to go back with him."

Crowley has never threatened a demon senior to him before. It's not long before he promises to himself that he will be able to do so again, as it's a fine sport. It's not long after that when he is placed with other new demons, learning his new trade.

It's complicated work, and it will require a return to Earth, but Crowley's already decided that he's going to do well with this.

After all, he survived Alastair's racks and personal attention. He can survive whatever torments these 'Crossroads Demons' care to give to him, and master them besides.

Crowley is well past one hundred and seventy six years as a Crossroads Demon when he decides to try a small amount of risk taking. It takes some truly nasty deals and some backstabbing and even a touch of threats with the use of his newly acquired hellhounds, but on the anniversary of his start, on his one hundred and seventy seven years as a Crossroads Demon, he becomes King of the Crossroads, and so able to manage the whole lot of them.

It's rather nice to be managing a lot of demons who are as nasty as he expects them to be. All he has to do when he worries about some demons trying to take his job is think of what he would do in their place, compensate for exactly how intelligent they are, and it's not difficult to unravel their plans from there.

(Crowley's not arrogant, just smart enough to know what his neighbors are thinking, that's all. And, if necessary, broker a few deals with Alastair, who can make any demon sing.

And when all else fails he's taken up breeding hellhounds and learning to train

them. It certainly helps calm down any demon foolish enough to try using force to remove him from office.)

If there's any single thing he appreciates about Hell, Crowley would most definitely cite that there's not a single demon in Hell who lies about their nature. They're all genuinely nasty, and it's refreshing to find that kind of honesty. There's nothing quite like it on Earth, after all.

All in all Crowley learns how to manage his time between his established life on Earth and his role in Hell, and most importantly he learns exactly what he needs to bribe the Fallen angels in Hell with so that they keep their paws off of his demons.

Take Asmodeus, for example. As an angel who is fond of excess and satisfying his minor pleasures when not acting as mediator between certain conflicts in Hell, Crowley has learned that obtaining certain beautiful creatures (from virgins to birds to vases of Ming origin) will keep the angel from abusing the demons who wear female form while working.

This in turn has led to those demons owing Crowley some form of gratitude, and in turn strengthens his overall position.

So as two hundred years as a demon approaches, Crowley is comfortable in his position, powerful, and more than capable of navigating the tangles of politics and bureaucracy that is Hell.

Naturally, this is when something happens to bollocks it all up.

There are scorch marks on the walls of the cage today, and there is a rare flush of heat in Lucifer's hands and face that makes him ache terribly.

Fire does nothing to the walls of the cage, and he remains trapped, but he's not expecting freedom. He honestly doesn't know why he keeps trying, not when he knows that it's futile.

"Father, didn't you have a purpose for me?" Lucifer asks the walls, quiet. "Surely creating Hell wasn't all you wanted me to do? I'm alive, I'm still strong, surely there will be an escape from here?"

He doesn't pray. He's never prayed to God from Hell. He never will. These quiet questions, however, he doesn't care if God hears them or not, for Lucifer *knows* that he will never receive an answer.

Instead he'll be flung face-first into whatever task God wants him to do, and instead he'll be given a choice that won't be a choice at all.

Lucifer hates the waiting, the long silence as he waits for something, anything to happen. He could call down an angel, a demon, he could do almost anything he

wants in Hell from his cage, he can even watch over Earth.

No, what he wants is something new to happen. Something he didn't cause, something he has no control over.

"Is that too much to ask?" Lucifer whispers to the walls, but the only change he sees is the ice and cold covering the scorch marks over, healing the marks on the walls.

"Damn you," Lucifer whispers again, and it's a measure of how desperately alone he is at this moment that he reaches out with his mind, with his Grace and finds a demon in Hell. It's a measure of how bored he is that he sinks his mind into the demon's mind and watches the world from behind its eyes.

It doesn't take long before he decides to experiment, to pull the strings on his puppet and even listen to its thoughts.

The first thing Crowley does when he realize that Lucifer - *Lucifer, Lord of all demons and He who has been named Satan, the Devil, Destroyer of all* - has begun to take control of his body is lock his office door.

That's about all he can do before Lucifer has his hands under his control, and then Crowley is nothing more than a puppet, a meatsuit for Lucifer to jerk around as he wishes.

Oddly enough, it's not fear that Crowley feels, but instead annoyance at his day being interrupted like this. There's no awe, no urge to go on bended knee, as he's never met Lucifer.

"Am I really just a legend to you, Crowley?" Lucifer says with Crowley's voice, and oh, but Crowley can feel the weight of age in Lucifer's voice coupled with the amusement, and now he has fear.

"I never had occasion to meet you," Crowley says, but not aloud and more with loud thoughts, and he has no idea what to even call Lucifer - Lord? Father? Creator of the race that I've become?

There's a long pause as Lucifer's attention drifts, but Crowley can't move from his comfortable office chair, and he can't raise his drink to his lips, and then Lucifer is making him stand, walk across to the window in Crowley's office that isn't a window. It's more of a portal for him to see any place in Hell and any place on Earth, and Crowley paid quite a lot for the artifact.

Crowley can only watch as Lucifer changes its scene, can only wonder at what he's looking at as the scene flickers and shows a pale grey and blue cube.

"My cage," Lucifer says, resting Crowley's hand on the wall. Crowley can *feel* an intense cold coming from where Lucifer is sinking into him, and he can *feel* the

weight of Lucifer's power on him. "I won't wear you for long, little demon."

The reassurance isn't reassuring at all.

Lucifer walks back over to Crowley's desk, and spends time examining the papers and books and paperweights and every little odd and end that decorates the surface, and Crowley wonders if this fascinates him, or if the Devil is truly that bored. He doesn't voice the question, but Lucifer answers him regardless.

"Boredom, Crowley. The cage consists of four walls and nothing else, and watching from afar can become so tedious. I believe I've begun to see a use to you demons, however. You're too hot, perhaps, but I could fix that." Lucifer's tone is pondering, and Crowley notes the undercurrent of hatred running through Lucifer's voice and thoughts. As the best deal-maker Hell has, Crowley has learned to read voices and body language out of necessity, and it's not comforting at all to be able to hear the ragged edge of old hate in this creature's voice.

Abruptly Crowley is jerked out of his thoughts by the feel of fingers on his belt and trousers, and the low sound of Lucifer's laughter.

"He hasn't denied me this, I see," Lucifer says with a chuckle, and then Crowley is arching at the feeling of his fingers brushing over his cock and Lucifer has given Crowley control over his body back, except for one hand, and so Crowley leans back against his desk heavily as Lucifer uses his fingers in ways that Crowley had never tried before.

"I've had occasion to do this before, Crowley," Lucifer whispers through Crowley's lips, and he is interrupted by a rising moan from Crowley. Crowley reaches back and grips his desk, shaking with arousal and, as Lucifer fiddles with his tip, with the sudden urges to orgasm, to let go of any and all control.

"If you come before I want you to," Lucifer says, fingers tapping Crowley's tip, "I'll twist it off." It's a casual, cold order and Crowley has to bite his tongue to prevent crude words and another urge to come. It has been too long since he last thought of sex, and Lucifer knows exactly how to test his control.

Crowley tilts his head up and whines, deep in his throat as Lucifer does something with his fingers and even though it's Crowley's hand, it's not Crowley controlling it, and that makes it so much *better* then he had been expecting.

It lasts, and lasts until Crowley is unraveled and has drawn blood from his lips to keep from coming, as Lucifer doesn't let up, doesn't stop, and when Lucifer whispers 'come for me, Crowley,' Crowley's voice breaks as he cries out, coming hard.

As Lucifer withdraws from Crowley, heat rushes in until Crowley is nearly burning from temperatures he had become accustomed to here in Hell. He sags back heavily against the desk, sliding down to sit on the floor as his legs fail him.

It's only a small use of power to clean himself and his clothes, but he can't shake the lingering chill that makes the warmth of Hell too much, and most of all he can't shake the alien hatred he felt from Lucifer - hatred directed towards humans, towards demons.

It's terrifying, that's what it is. Crowley doesn't let himself stay on the floor for long, and the first thing he does when he stands is turn off his window, so he doesn't see the cage floating in the darkness.

The second thing he does is make preparations to leave for Earth early, so he can begin to make some plans.

For survival's sake, if nothing else.

There is a single perfect moment of clarity, and then Lucifer understands what will be expected of him. He understands what vessels are, he knows who Sam and Dean Winchester are, and most importantly he understands what will be required to free him from his cage.

There's the recognition that he's received this moment thousands of years after those in Heaven did, and there's the recognition that his Fallen haven't walked upon Earth yet, and perhaps they should.

Lucifer summons three Fallen, gives them a limited summary of events, and tells them to spread the news. He doesn't check to see if they do, and instead turns his attention inwards.

He will need to learn how to kill Michael, after all, and that requires learning how to kill the emotions that would stop him from finishing the blow. His hallucinations (they aren't truly memories, not any more) change as he changes his thoughts.

Michael's decapitated head stares at him, rolled to its side on the floor, but Lucifer isn't bothered by it. No, no, if he can become used to the sight, he can make the sight real.

Lucifer doesn't close his eyes, and he doesn't look away.

Part IV.